

Testimony to Senate Education Committee
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I serve as a board member on both the NEK Choice School District and the Essex North Supervisory Union in rural Essex County, Vermont.

I have been listening throughout the session, and you have been hearing from full time professionals and people whose work regularly brings them into rooms like this, across many sectors, talking about maps, representation, and lines on paper.

I am here in a different way, on a different day. I am a school board member from a district with the most square miles in the state and the lowest population density, covering Essex County with the exception of four towns. It is our day. NEK Day at the State House, the people's house. I sometimes think NEK Day is scheduled in January because if you can make it here then, you have proven you are serious or at least well prepared. We came in from the farthest reaches of Vermont in January because showing up still matters, especially for rural places, and because presence is often how we make ourselves visible.

So sitting here today, in a room we are honored to be invited into, I feel both responsibility and appreciation. Too often, distance makes places like mine feel optional. What makes today different is that this Senate Committee on Education did not treat Essex County as optional.

When you came to Canaan, there was excitement in the air to start. There was pride too. As the visit went on, that energy settled into a very open conversation. You could see it in the room. Body language mattered. There were warm smiles, real eye contact, and questions that showed you were listening. The way you interacted with the students stood out most. Your reactions were natural. You responded to them with pride, and the students felt it.

Once you have visited Essex County, you cannot unsee the distance, the geography, or the daily realities of life in the most remote part of the state. That visit built trust. You demonstrated what inclusion actually looks like on the ground.

I also come from what the former 2021 Vermont Community Index identified as the most vulnerable place in the state. High child poverty, food insecurity, and long distances to basic services are part of daily life for many families, and those realities walk through our school doors every day.

From that place, I want to talk about school choice, not as an abstraction, but as something necessary.

The NEK Choice School District was born out of voluntary Act 46 work. Communities chose to come together. This was not imposed. Ten small towns, some with very small student populations, recognized that standing alone was not sustainable. Working together was.

Out of necessity, we built shared governance, shared advocacy, and a unified voice where none had existed before. And something unexpected happened. By coming together, we did not lose representation. We found more of it. More towns were heard. More concerns were carried together. Smaller voices were amplified instead of isolated.

That work took time. It took trust. Which raises an important question as you consider what comes next. How do we recreate that success instead of undoing it? How do we build systems that strengthen representation for rural communities rather than fragment it again?

It is difficult to express how concerning it is now the unintended consequences of mapping decisions that divide our new district and remove representation at the town level. We have come too far together to accept that, especially for communities that have long been overlooked. Larger districting proposals risk undoing exactly the kind of collaboration the state has asked rural communities to build.

In places with no sidewalks, no public transit, and limited infrastructure, school choice allows families to align schools with where parents actually work, often across town lines, county lines, and state lines. That flexibility is not optional. It is how daily life functions.

There is a phrase I keep coming back to because it captures what many rural Vermonters experience quietly. Many times, repeatedly, our distance makes us optional.

That brings me to process. A recent Commission working on Act 73 was charged with visiting all fourteen counties in person. Every county was visited except Essex. The message Essex County received is that our distance makes us optional. That is not an isolated oversight. It reflects a pattern Essex County knows well from many groups. We are underserved within an already underserved region. When engagement thins, trust does too. **This Committee knows with confidence that driving to Canaan in person makes a difference.**

There is a pattern. When hardworking organizations describe themselves as serving the Northeast Kingdom, too often, that work stops short of Essex County. Building real representation requires reaching every part of the NEK, not just the places that are easiest to get to.

How many other areas of the state would have accepted lack of equity for Universal Pre K? After five years of advocacy, I am grateful to Senator Ram Hinsdale for bringing forward S214 to correct an inadvertent statutory technicality that left some preschoolers behind. Act 166 is close to twelve years old, and children who should have had access to truly universal pre K at its start are now approaching high school graduation. That gap matters, and S214 is an important step toward fixing it. **So my ask is a simple one. As you move forward, continue to do what you did in Canaan. Demonstrate equity to the places that are easiest to miss**

and challenge others who appear in front of you to do so as well. Let lived experience inform the maps before they are finalized.

And as you consider changes to governance and districting, please protect the systems rural communities built voluntarily and out of necessity, especially those that have expanded representation rather than reduced it. In fragile economies, school choice goes hand in hand where family practicalities go as a lifeline.

If a proposal weakens the voice of the most remote towns, then it is not ready yet. We know this Committee understands that, because you have already shown it by coming to see us.

Thank you for coming to Essex County, and thank you for carrying what you heard with you as this work continues demonstrating equity to the underserved places. **It is a privilege to be here on NEK Day, in the people's house, and to be able to speak plainly on behalf of our communities.**